XERO Comics 4

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AUTHORITY

O.K. AXIS, HERE WE COME!

BY DON THOMPSON

ILLOS SWIPED BY MAGGIE CURTIS

#4 IN THE SERIES

AND ALL IN COLOR FOR A DIME

For a long time I wondered why I was unable to accept Hollywood's premise that the Germans in World War II were either misunderstood boys (Marlon Brando in "The Young Lions") or really nice guys (Van Heflin in "Under Ten Flags") while the Americans were deserters or draft dodgers (Montgomery Clift and Dean Martin, respectively, in "The Young Lions") and the British were bumbling, incompetent blowhards (Charles Laughton in "Under Ten Flags"). I was far too young, born in 1935, to remember much of the war and I lost no relatives or friends. Although two of my brothers served in the Navy in the Pacific, my family never told me much about the war. So what could I have against the Germans and Japanese?

I think I have finally found the answer: the total propaganda saturation reached me through the comic books, especially through the adventures of the Sub-Mariner, the Human Torch, and Captain America, and subsidiary characters in the magazines featuring them. When you were raised on these, you learned to hate the enemy.

All of these characters got their start in or around 1939, two years before America got involved in the war, but they really came into their own when Pearl Harbor was attacked, for several reasons.

Captain America, of course, was a patriotic hero-figure of a type which couldn't fully flower in peacetime when patriots are "flag-wavers." It took a full-scale war to release the unabashed patriotism which shot him to the top.

The Sub-Mariner started out by marauding all shipping, with some emphasis on American vessels. When we entered the war he switched to wreching Nazi U-boats and Japanese destroyers, making him, naturally, a more sympathetic character to American kids.

The Human Torch, a man of fire, was just too terrible to unleash fully against the average gangster. It takes a special kind of villain to deserve burning, such as the Japanese who had attacked Pearl Harbor and the Nazis who were slaughtering Jews.

Each of these three characters had unique special powers or attributes and each deserves a separate article, but they have to be discussed together because of the interplay between them. We'll start with the Human Torch.

The Human Torch wasn't human. He was an android, created by Dr. Horton, a relatively sane scientist, in the first issue of MARVEL MYSTERY COMICS in 1939. Dr. Horton had no intention of creating a flaming man, merely an artificial one, but because of some design flaw his creation burst into flame on contact with the air. (The color editor didn't read the text very carefully, incidentally, because the flames were supposed to be blue and they came out red. They looked better red, so they stayed that way.)

The story opens with Dr. Horton holding a press conference to show off his latest creation, a well-built, square-jawed man with wavy blond hair and blue tights. (By the second issue the tights were red and stayed that way, though the design changed slightly, shorts being added over them in later years.) This magnificent man was frozen in an upright position in a huge, air-tight glass cage. When Dr. Horton released air into the cage, the figure burst into flame and moved around. Draining out the air left him flameless and immobile again. The reporters were impressed and urged Dr. Horton to destroy it.

Nobody remarked on the fact that the creature could survive without air, an ability I rank as at least equal to the power of self-conflagration.

Dr. Horton refused to destroy his android, even after a group of his fellow scientists second the motion. They had tried to measure the heat produced by the blazing man, but their instruments were inadequate for the task, although it couldn't have been too hot, since the glass didn't melt. When they found that Horton had no control over the flame-creature, they told him to destroy it. Instead, Horton had the glass container sealed in a steel tube and the tube imbedded in a huge block of cement, pending the time when he would find a way to control the flame.

Somehow, air seeped in through the concrete, steel, and glass, and the tomb burst wide open one night, releasing the Human Torch (a name given to the android by newspapermen). He ran wild through the city, igniting everything within several feet of himself. At this point he even started talking, with no previous lessons. His first words, for posterity, were: "I'm burning alive! --Why must everything I touch, turn to flame?" Not bad conversation for a first try, though the punctuation is a bit shoddy.

THE HUMAN TORCH

Fire engines turned out to fight him, but the water from their hoses turned to steam on contact with the Torch and the hose burned through when he stepped on it. Conscience-stricken at the damage he caused, the Torch ran to an estate with a swimming pool on the grounds, melted his way through the iron gate and plunged into the pool, extinguishing himself.

The estate belonged to Sardo, a gangster who saw in the Torch a handy tool. He put a glass cover over the pool, drained out the water and air, caught the Torch, and went into the "fire insurance business. A warehouse owner refused

to pay protection and Sardo, putting the Torch in an airtight glass tank (he filled the pool with water and performed the operation in a diving suit), took the Torch to a warehouse and broke the glass with a rock. The Torch, freed, burst into flame and set fire to the warehouse. Thinking the matter over, he deduced that Sardo was a "low-down racketeer" who was using him for nefarious ends.

Jumping to escape the now-collapsing warehouse, Torchy found that he could fly because "the blue and combined red flames made the Human Torch lighter than air." He went to Sardo's house and burned it down scalding his henchmen, then confronted Sardo in the gangster's underground laboratory. Sardo threw chemicals at the Torch, but the acids burst into flame without touching hi. However, nitrogen (called nitro by everybody in the story) extinguished his flames momentarily. At this point, a fire chief shot the Torch in the forehead, but his skin was still hot enough to melt the bullet, and he went back to wrecking the lab.

Sardo attempted to crown him with a tank of sulphuric acid and was killed when it exploded from the heat. Then, in the middle of the burning lab, Torchy experimented with the nitrogen tank, turning his flame off and on, until he was able to do it at will without the aid of nitrogen.

He apologized for the damage he had unwittingly caused and was released in custody of Dr. Horton, who blurted out his intentions of making a fortune with the Torch. Angered by the taint of commercialism in his creator, the Human Torch burned through the roof and set out on his own.

In later adventures, many of the Torch's powers changed or disappeared, and new ones were added. For a while, he was able to command fire by giving weird yells, but this ability was later restricted to flames of his own creation and then dropped entirely. He soon learned to throw fireballs with amazing accuracy, but this got out of hand and became pretty ridiculous when he started weaving webs of fire, surrounding villains with barrels of fire (complete with lids) and doing other outlandish tricks.

In some stories, a common fire extinguisher would quench his fire long enough to enable somebody to clout him on the head. Not only could he not stand up to fire hoses, but he could be put out by a deep snow. He retained the ability to burn his way through steel and just about everything but asbestos, to melt bullets (but only with his flame turned on) and to fly.

He also acquired, in the first issue of THE HUMAN TORCH (1940), a sidekick named Toro. Toro was the boy-assistant type which nearly all costume heroes of the comics sooner or later acquire to provide a figure with whom the young readers can identify. As was customary, Toro was an orphan. His parents were killed in a train wreck in which he was badly injured, and the Torch took him to Dr. Horton, who saved him the only way he could -- by making him another Human Torch. Toro could also burst into flame, fly, throw fireballs, etc, but his flame was much weaker than the Torch's. A bucket of water could put him out, and the Torch was forever having to rescue him, surrender to keep thugs from harming the boy and so forth.

You could tell the two apart when they flamed easily enough, even though their features were not visible when they were ablaze (Torch's were in the first couple of stories, but the effect was poor). Torch, besides being bigger, had a darker flame, caused by a number of shading lines drawn in. Toro's flame was clean and didn't look as hot.

Neither the Human Torch nor Toro had alter egos. When not aflame, Torchy wore the red tights already mentioned and Toro wore black or green bathing trunks and boots.

Occasionally, they would don street clothes or even formal wear, if the occasion demanded, though, because they frequently had to burst into flame at a moment's notice, without time to remove their inflammable outer garments. The police commissioner had an awful lot of walls, floors, ceilings and windows melted, too. They were handy allies, but damnably expensive.

Torch and Toro frequently burst into flame with the words: "Flame on!" These were not magic words, as "Shazam!" was, but more of a battle cry, along the lines of "Up, up, and away!"

They sometimes left their hands unflamed for carrying things or flamed only parts of themselves when they wanted to melt something inconspicuously.

After a couple of stories in which the villains were burned to death, the Torch took an oath not to kill with his flame, which was why he spun ornate webs and stuff. Burning to death is extremely painful and it wasn't possible to create villains who deserved it for every Torch story. Then came World War II.

When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the Nazi stuffed Jews into ovens, they abandoned all claims to sympathy. Torchy was free to use his flame to the utmost and he did, resulting in some pretty gruesome stories and covers.

One sickening cover shows the blazing buddies rescuing an attractive redhead from a Jap with a Samurai sword. Toro is melting through the ceiling and hitting one of the onlooking Jap soldiers in the throat with a fireball, while Torch has burned up through the floor and grabbed the executioner by the arm, melting the flesh off down to the bone from shoulder to wrist. Ugh. This cover, like many others of THE HUMAN TORCH and MARVEL, was by the noted science fiction artist, Alex Schomberg.

The stories in that issue have nothing to do with the cover (they rarely did), and dealt with the destruction of a Nazi rocket bomb base which was bombarding New York and the outwitting and capturing of a Gestapo agent called the Rabbit. Strange name for a Gestapo agent, eh? Well, you could hardly call him anything else because he looked like a rabbit: brown skin, long ears, buck teeth and an upcurving moustache which gave him the semblance of a hare-lip.

Many of the villains had dark skin, incidentally, but this is not meant to imply that they were Negroes. The Python, for instance, had brown skin, striped with black, but that was to increase his resemblance to his namesake. Both the Python and the Rabbit were pure Aryan.

Freaks were common in these stories, as in most super-hero comics. There was the Parrot, who looked like a parrot, and the End, who looked like death warmed over and allowed to congeal again, and Dr. Smart, who looked and acted like a jerk no matter what the text writer said.

The Torch was at his peak during his rivalry with the Sub-Mariner, which I'll discuss later, if you'll bear with me.

The Human Torch was the brainchild of Carl Burgos, who drew many of the early stories and probably signed even more. He wrote himself into one story, where Torchy and Toro leap from his drawing board to suggest lampooning the Germans (this was before the U.S. got into the war; all three -- Torch, Sub-Mariner, Captain America -- were fighting the Germans and Japs before was was declared). Burgos got the okay from his boss and had his writers do a story. He then did preliminary drawings and turned them over to a staff of hack artists who finished them.(commendable honesty on his part to admit he didn't do the whole thing, I thought). The comics were dropped in

Berlin and Hitler was almost laughed out of power, which irked him, naturally, and

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It's hard to imagine laughing a mass murderer out of power, isn't it?

Adolph ordered the extermination of Burgos which was foiled, naturally, by Torch and Toro. During the whole of the story, Burgos went to rather ridiculous length to avoid showing his face, making it conspicuous by its absence. Considering that Hitler, Goebbels, Goering, Churchill, MacArthur and others were regularly depicted, his modesty is quite surprising, if it was modesty.

Burgos also worked for MARVEL SCIENCE FICTION in 1951, doing portraits of Sturgeon, Hubbard, Merrill and others for a series of controversies in that magazine.

After the war, I lost touch with the Human Torch and the others. Apparently they started fading after V-J Day. By 1949 Toro was missing and Torchy was palling around with Sun Girl, an attractive blonde costume heroine of undetermined powers. He was drawn by a number of artists, some better than Burgos, though lacking his flair. Most of these artists didn't sign their names; one who did was Dick Ayers, who once did a strip called "The Ghost Rider." Ayers drew the Torch in a series of circles and ovals, as if he were copying from a primer in cartooning. Then, some time around 1950, the Torch was snuffed out.

Up to this time he had appeared in MARVEL, THE HUMAN TORCH, SELECT, and ALL WINNERS. In the early days of these comics, they were published by Timely Comics and edited by Stan Lee (who, I think, is now the writer of the comic strip "Willie Lumpkin," a rather innocuous thing about a bumbling postman). By 1949, the company had become the Marvel Comic Group and in 1954, when the characters were revived, the distributors were Atlas. To this day the Timely firm and the names of Stan Lee and Martin Goodman are connected, and there are still a number of horror-monster comics, produced by them and distributed under the Atlas impress.

Apparently Lee felt that 1954 was the year for reviving super heroes (the movie serial of Captain America was reissued this year) because they also brought back the Sub-Mariner and Captain America. Apparently they were wrong, because none of them lasted very long. It's a shame, too, because they brought them back with a bang, retaining much of the flair of the early days with the polish of years of practice and training on the parts of the artists.

Instead of pretending that the Torch either never existed before or else had never been away, Atlas attempted to explain his absence. The Torch, it seemed had been thoroughly extinguished by a new chemical developed by a criminal mastermind and had been buried in the desert in a state of suspended animation. He lay there for years, until an atomic bomb was exploded over his grave.

The radiation permeated him and gave him new life. As it happened, his flame was even more powerful than before -- it was now atomic flame -- and the chemical which had undone him earlier no longer had any effect on him. He rounded up the gang which has snuffed him and then went looking for Toro, who had been sold to the Russians.

The Russians had brainwashed the kid and were grooming him as a secret weapon. He had just been released over West Berlin when the Torch showed up, fought him to a standstill and reconverted him to the American Way. Even though neither character had aged, it did explain the time lapse and was quite a good story to boot. Somehow, though, the series just didn't click. Their comeback pretty well coincided with the outbreak of the Comics Code, which may have been an inhibiting factor. At any rate, atomic flame or no, the Human Torch sputtered and went out.

Captain America was a symbol, patriotism personified. He was a square-jawed, rugged man who wore a striking red, white and blue costume decorated with stars and stripes, with a skin-tight hood and mask from which sprouted tiny wings, just above the ear-holes. On his forehead was emblazoned a large white "A" and he carried a shield

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No, you Hawthorne fans, it stood for "America."

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which was painted like a target with red, white and blue concentric circles. Over his tights, he wore a pair of baggy shorts and a wide belt with a tremendous buckle. Elbow-length red gauntlets covered his hands and arms and he was shod in red boots with folding tops. He was colorful, to say the least.

In between battles with the forces of evil, he was a mild-looking blond named Steve Rogers who, after the war, was a school teacher and wore glasses. During the war he was Private Steve Rogers of the U.S. Army and wore no glasses. Whenever trouble broke out during the war, he'd duck into a convenient foxhole and emerge, self-promoted, as Captain America, leaping valorously into the thick of the fray and emerging victorious. After these forays, however, Steve Rogers generally wound up peeling potatoes for deserting under fire. Rather inglorious, but the Article of War permit shooting the offender for that crime, so he got of pretty easily.

Cap's sidekick was a kid named Bucky, of rather indterminate age. During the war, he enlisted with Rogers and, as Private Bucky Barnes, wound up peeling from the same pile of spuds for the same reasons. After the war he shed a few years and was a high-school student in Steve Rogers' classes.

Bucky, when outfitted for duty, wore a costume similar to, but less dramatic than, Captain America's. He wore a simple face mask (as most boy sidekicks, from Batman's Robin to Mr. Scarlet's Pinky, seem to have done) which concealed the area about the eyes only. He wore tight red pants and blue boots, blue trunks, a baggy blue long-sleeved shirt, red gauntlets and a broad belt with a red-and-white-striped shield embossed upon the buckle. The belt was decorated with white stars, and his shirt had a yellow collar. His hair was, I guess, supposed to be red, though it varied greatly according to the whims of the color editor.

Captain America had a girl friend whose name, appropriately enough, was Betsy Ross. She was a reporter, naturally, because everybody knows that reporters lead exciting lives. Everybody, that is, but us reporters.

Cap had no special powers and was seemingly motivated only by a desire to do good. He used no weapon, except his shield, with which he bashed people. Sometimes he threw it at people and sometimes he just used it to deflect bullets.

Captain America was the brainchild of two of the all-time greats in the comic book industry: Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. Simon and Kirby created many memorable characters, but these were their most widely known. There was even a "Captain America" movie serial in 1943 from Republic. (It was re-released in 1954 as "The Return of Captain America," which is a pretty sneaky trick.) Dick Purcell starred as the good Captain, in a costume which lacked the shield and the small wings on the hood. Bucky was nowhere to be seen in this rather routine crime-busting story with, according to Walter Lee's checklist, overtones of science fiction and horror. I think I saw a chapter or two of it, but it didn't stick with me. A perusal of some stills loaned me by Dick Lupoff shows one good reason why it lacked the dash of the comics version: Our Hero was pudgy. No muscular stomach on the cinema Captain, just an unsuccessfully sucked in pot. Blasphemy.

Before the United States was in World War II, Captain America was already pointing the way for the country to follow: Hitler was a menace and should be fought. So, on a pre-war cover of CAPTAIN AMERICA -- the first issue, at that -- Simon & Kirby showed Cap belting Adolph Hitler. This was a first in comics and was very quickly imitated; other comics appeared, showing their heroes lambasting Hitler.

I haven't been able to unearth many Captain America stories, despite the overwhelming largess of Bill Thailing and others who loaned me many comics dealing with the Human Torch and Sub-Mariner. Cap appeared in his own comic, in ALL WINNERS and, later, in MARVEL and SELECT. In 1949 his title devolved to CAPTAIN AMERICA'S WEIRD TALES, with the emphasis on the last two words.

During the war years, Cap was constantly battling his arch-nemesis, the Red Skull, a Nazi agent who wore a red hood made in the design of a red skull. In a story in CAPTAIN AMERICA'S WEIRD TALES, however, the Red Skull is dead, in Hell, and really has a red skull, home-grown. He gets the devil to kidnap Captain America to Hell, they fight and Cap wins his freedom. Bucky is not mentioned.

In the only wartime adventure of Captain America that I have on hand, Bucky is Private Bucky Barnes. In this story, he and Rogers desert their posts and, as Captain America and Bucky, battle and defeat the Mock Mikado, a disavowed twin brother of the Japanese emperor, who is taking over California (with remarkable ease, I might add). It's not one of their better adventures, but it beats the degenerate post-war days, when a younger and more prettified Captain America battled petty crooks.

When he made his reappearance in 1954, the absence of the patriotic pair was quickly explained away: "Yes, the greatest champion of democracy is back with his pal Bucky ...back to face the worst menace the freedom-loving peoples of the world have ever faced! Together they battled fascists and nazis, but now they're needed again to fight 'The Betrayers'! They fought and battled all through World War II, these valiant and courageous patriots! But, with the coming of peace, there was still no rest for them! Communism was spreading its ugly, grasping tentacles all over the world!" And away they went. Like all the revived heroes of this group, they had the life of the original, but not the longevity. They died almost a-borning.

And just where were those slackers during the Korean War?

Frankly, Captain America was too important a figure to be lumped in with others; he deserves an article of his own, done by someone with more information at his disposal than I have. What little I do remember or could find only whetted my appetite for more, so I'll be looking forward to it myself.

If the team of Simon and Kirby had one great flaw, it was that they didn't stick with their creations. They would develop one, write and draw it for a while, and then turn it over to others while they went on to conquer new fields. One of their favorite themes was the idea of the boy gang. They created "The Boy Commandos," "The Boy Explorers," "The Newsboy Legion," and the really excellent "Boys' Ranch" series. They also created a group called "The Young Allies."

YOUNG ALLIES COMICS #1, Summer 1941, crammed a hell of a lot of adventures into 64 pages. Bucky and Toro, sidekicks of Captain America and the Human Torch, were the leaders of the gang. The others were caricatures whose counterparts can be seen in "The Boy Explorers," "The Boy Commandoes," and, for that matter, "Tom Swift."

There was Tubby, the fat slob; Knuckles, the pugnacious kid from Brooklyn; Jefferson Worthington Sandervilt, boy inventor who vociferates exclusively in polysyllabic pronouncements of imposing grandeur and resplendent vocabulary. And there was Whitewash Jones, a minstrel-show caricature of a Negro which would have the NAACP up in arms in completely justifiable indignation today. He had bulging eyes, pendulous lips, buck teeth, a low forehead, a clumsy and superstitious nature, a love for watermelon and a talent for the harmonica.

YOUNG ALLIES was designed for the action lover. Take a couple of deep breaths and I'll summarize the story in the first issue as briefly as possible.

The story opens with Secret Agent Zero fleeing from uniformed Nazi agents with chattering submachine guns who corner him on the docks in New York harbor. No police showed up, but the Young Allies did, and they drove the Nazis off with wooden rifles. Whitewash stumbles and breaks his rifle, giving the trick away, but Toro blasts the Nazi boat out of the water with a fireball.

Toro and Bucky start fighting over who is to be leader of the club (Bucky formed it but Toro feels that he earned leadership by killing the Nazis) but call off the fight to tend to Zero. Zero slips away and is captured by Nazis led by the Red Skull. The boys follow and are also captured because Toro forgets to turn on his flame (Simon & Kirby edited YOUNG ALLIES and apparently felt favoritism toward Bucky; they ignored Toro completely for pages at a time) and Whitewash saves them by pulling a lever ("Mebby is's a police ala'hm") which dumps tons of earth and rock on the Nazis in their cave. The Red Skull escapes with Zero and the gang follows him to Berlin.

En route they catch a Nazi who tries to bomb their ship, sink a U-boat and gun down eight Nazi boubers, then sail across the Channel on a raft, with Toro destroying a Stuka which attacks them in mid-crossing. Getting into Germany, they are patted on the head by Hitler himself ("Ly! Ly! Vot nice Shermun boyz!") who apparently doesn't notice Bucky's costume or Toro's bathing trunks, and eventually get into Gestapo headquarters, where they are captured by the Red Skull (a hell of a long way to come for that, wasn't it?) and sent to a concentration camp. They break out as soon as Toro remembers he can melt the wires, Bucky disguises himself as the Red Skull by painting a real human skull red and putting it over his head (God know how this trick is done) and they escape into Russia, where they are almost sent to Siberia, but they escape after fighting off a Jap tank outfit and flee into China, where they get sanctuary from Chiang Kai-Shek.

While Zero gets passage on a yacht bound for America by revealing to the skipper that "he" is a girl (no leers, gang, all she does is let down her long hair, Rapunzel fashion), the boys get caught in a tong war and escape by scaring the Chinese off with firecrackers (know who invented firecrackers?).

Back where they started, they go to a cemetery to read a message on a tombstone and are again captured by the Red Skull, who's pretty adept at it by this time. Finally the gang sends out a special S.O.S. and Captain America and the Human Torch come to the rescue, making short work of the Nazis. The whole thing closes in a flurry of patriotic speeches.

Whew! It may not bring back my sense of wonder, but it makes me remember what it was like to have one.

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A number of subsidiary costume heroes appeared in the Timely-Atlas publications. During the war, there was a rash of costume heroes, mostly of a patriotic nature, such as the Patiot, who was distinguished primarily for the silly looking long-legged eagle emblazoned on his chest. There was the Destroyer, who wore gray and red tights with a skull on his chest, had a gray face -- and teeth -- and yellow, irisless eyes when in costume; out of costume he was normal looking. There were

There were others in MARVEL and DARING and ALL-WINNERS: The Black Avenger, The Whizzer, USA (Undercover Secret Agent), The Blue Diamond, The Silver Scorpion, The Citizen, The Thunderer, Captain Daring, and my own nomination for the silliest-looking costume hero of all time: The Fin. His costume was a pretty ordinary affair -- tights, boots, hood and goggles -- except for a two-foot shark's fin which jutted from his head. It may have made it pretty awkward going through doorways, but it established copyright.

Other characters in MARVEL included Terry Vance, schoolboy sleuth; Electro, a red, yellow, and green robot that looked like a Technicolor fire hydrant; The Masked Raider, and undistinguished cowboy; and Ka-Zar, a second-rate lord of the jungle. And there was the Vision. And the Angel.

The Vision was supernatural, a being from another dimension. He was the master of mist and smoke and he left and entered our dimension in smoke. It didn't take much, a smoldering cigarette would suffice. He was humanoid and wore an overall costume of green tights, a yellow and red reversible cape with a red collar, and blue gauntlets. His face was a light green and his eyes had no pupils. He was great.

Whenever evil walked the earth, the Vision arose out of smoke to fight it, with extraordinary strength, but not with invincibility, though he had advantages that other heroes didn't. For example, if he were trapped in a cave-in with one flickering candle, he could vanish into the candle smoke and re-form in the nearest smoke outside. He deserves a prominent place in another article, since he appeared in so many issues of MARVEL. He, also, was first drawn by Jack Kirby.

The Angel began his checkered career as an imitation of the Saint. In fact, the first Angel story, in the first issue of MARVEL, is a direct plagiarism of "The Saint in New York." Later, however, he embarked on a series of battles against deformed men -- dwarves, hunchbacks, even armless men -- and against the supernatural -- zombies, vampires, and wolfmen. The Angel was the creation of Paul Gustafson, the only person who ever signed the artwork, as far as I know. Exactly why he wore a costume is anybody's guess -- mine is exhibitionism -- because he had no secret identity. Even while in mufti, he was called only "the Angel," but he always put on his costume when trouble arose.

He wore a blue suit of tights, with leather bands at his wrists and a pair of large yellow wings decorated his chest. He wore a red cape, had yellow hair and a thin black moustache. At the end of each story, when justice was triumphant, the shadow of the Angel fell across the scene. He had no special powers, except the casting of that shadow on the most inaccessible places. I really don't know how that was done.

In the days of the Marvel aegis, circa 1949, there was a female crimefighter in MARVEL called the Blonde Phantom. I mention her to show how low they'd sunk, because she wore an elaborate, slit-skirted, low-necked red evening gown while fighting crime, which seems extremely inefficient. Her disguise consisted of an eye mask which, since she wore spectacles as her alter ego, Louise Grant, didn't disguise her very much. She was secretary to a private detective named Mark Mason, with whom she was in love but who was in love with the Blonde Phantom. Get the picture? One more thing: she couldn't don her costume in a convenient phone booth; it required a pretty elaborate boudoir and at least an hour of dressing and making up to transform her into the Blonde Phantom. And she even had her own comic book.

Another female crimefighter of the same period was Sun Girl, who palled around with the Human Torch, had a story of her own in MARVEL, and had a comic book of her own. I have no idea where she came from, what powers she had, if any, or whether she had an alter ego.

Her costume was attractive, though. A yellow long-sleeved smock, knee-length and belted at the waist, was worn over black tights.

She wore yellow high-heeled boots cut high on the sides, and black gloves which looked like they were part of the smock.

She wore no mask and had shoulder-length blonde hair.

Pretty, but unimaginative.

Prince Namor, known as the Sub-Mariner, was the offspring of an Atlantean princess and an American naval commander. Commander McKenzie was in Antarctica, blasting away the great ice packs and unwittingly raising hell with the undersea kingdom. Since the fishy folk couldn't fight them, they sent the Princess Fen, who looked human, to seduce the commander from his duty while they gathered an army.

She fell in love with him and he with her, they married and so forth. Then, on the day the army was massed beneath the ice, McKenzie's men began blasting away the ice pack so they could clear a path home. The shock waves wiped out the Atlantean army, and Fen, angered, leaped overboard and returned to her own people where, after a suitable interval, Prince Namor was born. The Princess Fen did not tell him about surface people until, as a stripling, he encountered and killed his first two, thinking that they were robots in their bulky diving suits. When he questioned his mother, she told him of his origin and explained that it was his duty to wipe out the surface people, a job he approached with gusto.

In the early years, before and during the war, the Sub-Mariner was a brawny, broad-shouldered brute, with arms that tapered to small hands and looked like drumsticks. He wore only black swimming trunks with a gold belt, though on occasion he would wear a cape of office or even ordinary surface man's clothing. On his heels were tiny wings which enabled him to fly. In later years, he was much thinner and looked years younger. All the early drawings and many of the latest ones, even up to 1954, were signed by Bill Everett, creator of the Sub-Mariner.

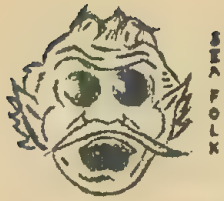
Of course Everett didn't do all the illustrations. Like Burgos, he had staffs of artists to finish his rough drawings and some of the stories were done by other artists altogether, most notably Powell, who drew the Shadow for Street & Smith and the Man in Black for Harvey.

Everett improved greatly in 14 years. The early work was hackwork, sloppy and grossly exagerrated. By 1954, he was turning out finely detailed, beautifully drawn work, as smooth and pleasing to the eye as the early stuff was crude and anatomically ridiculous.

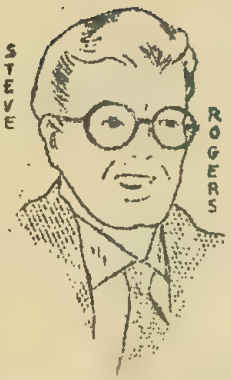
One portion of the later wartime Sub-Mariner remains to be described and it was this that made him outstanding: his face. His head was shaped like an inverted pyramid, tapering sharply from his closecropped black hair (again dependent upon the whims of the color editor) to the point of his long and slender chin. His cheekbones were high and his eyes were slanted, giving him an Oriental look, and his ears were large and pointed. His hairline formed a widow's peak, leaving space for his incredibly long, fine, S-shaped eyebrows. He looked a great deal like Fred Astaire.

PRINCESS FEN

Most of the wartime adventures of the Sub-Mariner, during the absence of Bill Everett, were written by Mickey Spillane, creator of Mike Hammer.



Spillane, to put it as politely as possible, was not and is not a good writer. He overwrites, underplots, and has no capacity for characterisation or empathy. The only figure in any of his fiction with any substance at all is his lead character, who is invariably Mickey Spillane as he sees himself. All other persons are cardboard figurines placed as scenery and as for foild for Super-Spillane. So it was with Mike Hammer and so, unfortunately, it was with the Sub-Mariner.

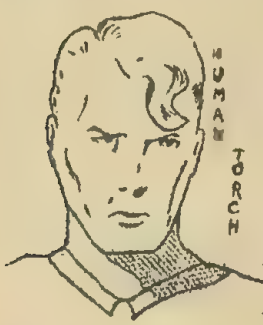


The sadism and masochism of "I, the Jury" is present in abundance in Spillane's stories of the Sub-Mariner, particularly when the war enabled him to release all stopes. All that is missing is the sexual emphasis, which wasn't justified by the war as the sadism apparently was.

For example, the lead story in SUB-MARINER COMICS #5 opens with Namor and his seafolk building a new warship with which he intends to destroy the Japs. He comes into the middle of a sea battle and gleefully watches his lieutenant, Jadda, machine-gun a Jap landing party. A destroyer attacks and he submerges, only to have a random shell tear off his periscope. ("Why the dirty no good-----! They can't do that to me!") He surfaces and blasts the destroyer with an incendiary bomb and dances for joy, but is torpedoed while gloating. His crew is killed, but Namor survives and, righting an overturned Jap torpedo boat, drives it head-on into a destroyer, diving clear before collision. He salvages a depth charge from his wrecked vessel and, with his superhuman strength, throws it at an approaching aircraft carrier, sinking it. (You keeping score?) He returns to the wreck of his own ship and machine- guns Japanese landing parties, then turns a flamethrower on them ("I'd give anything to have the Torch see me now! He thinks he's hot stuff!").

From here on it starts getting sadistic.

He boards a Jap submarine and, after throwing a Jap into the flaming ocean, torpedoes another sub. Searching his captured submarine, he finds a fat, comical Jap and, holding him by the hair, "gives his biceps a workout" by punching him in the stomach repeatedly ("This is what I call fun!") and then stuffs him "comically" in the conning tower where he is riddled by British machine gun bullets as Namor dives back into the water with a derisive "So long, sucker!"



In the water again, he races toward a lifeboat filled with Nipponese sailors ("Aha! Lady Luck's still with me!). Approaching the stern, he dives under the boat's hull ("Now I'll have some fun playing with these babies!"). Putting his shoulders to the keel, he upsets the small craft ("Upsy-daisy!"). The lifeboat flips over, throwing the sailors into the surging waves! As two of them attempt to climb on the upturned bottom, Namor grabs them rudely! ("Oh, no you don't! You young punks!")...then pushes

them below the surface, holding their heads underwater! ("You guys are supposed to be seamen...here's a taste of the sea!") Leaving their lifeless bodies, he climbs up on the boat's keel....

Any doubts about this being one of Spillane's stories? There's a great deal more, but it's awfully repetitious. He downs two more destroyers and two airplanes and wipes out two boatloads of Japs in landing parties.

The dialogue is so bad it's embarrassing to read it. Namor is constantly making such exclamations as: "Great Pickled Penguins" "Suffering Shad" "Holy Halibut" "Flyin' Flounders" "Cackling Catfish" "Hopping Herring" "Galloping Guppies" "Slithering Eels" and even, so help me, "Chuckling Clams!"

Spillane also wrote several short-short non-illustrated stories which were printed in MARVEL, HUMAN TORCH, and SUB-MARINER, and in the comics of other publishers altogether, such as TARGET COMICS. Those that are readable, stink.

All this is a great pity because Prince Namore was in many ways the most original character in Timely's stable. His face was imaginatively conceived and drawn and his origin was unworldly enough to give him an aura of glamour. He had abilities which varied from story to story, as did the Torch's, before they finally settled down. He had super-strength, he could fly, he could survive equally well above or beneath the water (though he did have to contact water periodically). In some of his early stories, bullets bounced off him, but this was wisely dropped because it made him almost invincible. He kept his strength and his ability to fly, as well as his amphibiousness.

In one of his early adventures, he is drugged to keep him weak because he is to be electrocuted for his crimes against the United States. He is strapped into the chair and the current is turned on but, instead of killing him, it revitalizes him. In a later story, electricity is used to knock him out.

Namor, or the Sub-Mariner, was very short-tempered (especially in the Spillane-authored stories) and very susceptible to flattery. In Spillane's hands, he was frequently very stupid, too. He had a number of girl friends, who came and went. Most prominent of them was Betty Dean, the first surface woman to befriend him. She was a New York policewoman who was able to partially control his wild desire to wreck the surface world during his impetuous youth. There was, briefly, a Venusian girl named Jarna who, though very humanoid herself, commanded an army of inhuman little people. And there was Princess Rathia, of his own people, who urged him to conquer the world.

Just as the Human Torch was imitated by Flame Boy and by Freddy Firefly, a lightning bug in an EC pre-trend animal comic, and Captain America was imitated by a houseful of patriotic costume heroes, Sub-Mariner, too, spawned an imitation, one that was to outlast him. Aquaman, a character in the Superman-DC-National line, was also the child of an atlantean woman and an American, in this case a lighthouse keeper. Aquaman didn't debut until 1941, two years after Namor's first appearance, but twenty years later Aquaman is still swimming around, and Sub-Mariner is long gone. Such is justice.

Sub-Mariner appeared regularly in his own comic book and in MARVEL and ALL-WINNERS, as well as "guesting" in THE HUMAN TORCH. All of the characters discussed in this article appeared in MARVEL at one time or another, except for some of the ones like the Destroyer and the Fin, who appeared in DARING COMICS.

All of these comic books had cluttered covers, often filled with fiendish machines, carefully labelled ("Death Ray Camera" "Poison Gas Cannnn"). The cover of one issue of MARVEL had no fewer than 17 labels explaining the action and I still can't figure out what was going on. That cover was by Schomberg, too.

I've mentioned some minor crossover of one character into another's story: Bucky and Toro, the Human Torch and Captain America. The Angel appeared in at least one Sub-Mariner story and there was other minor crossover. One story, which I'll soon summarize, dealt with the Human Torch, the Sub-Mariner, the Patriot, Ka-Zar, and the Angel.

The interesting thing is that these Timely Comics heroes rarely got along very well, even though no rivalry was stronger than the one which existed between the Human Torch and the Sub-Mariner.

The greatest battle in the history of the comic books must have been a "natural" for the writers. the rivalry between fire and water. It started early and cropped up frequently before Torchy and Namor gradually became grudging, then friendly allies. Rivalry, hell, it was war.

Their first scrap ended in a draw. Namor had trapped the Torch in an airtight glass cage, but he couldn't move it without letting air into it and he couldn't leave the scene or workmen would free the Torch. Betty Dean finally talked them both into admitting it was a stalemate and forgetting the whole thing. For a while.

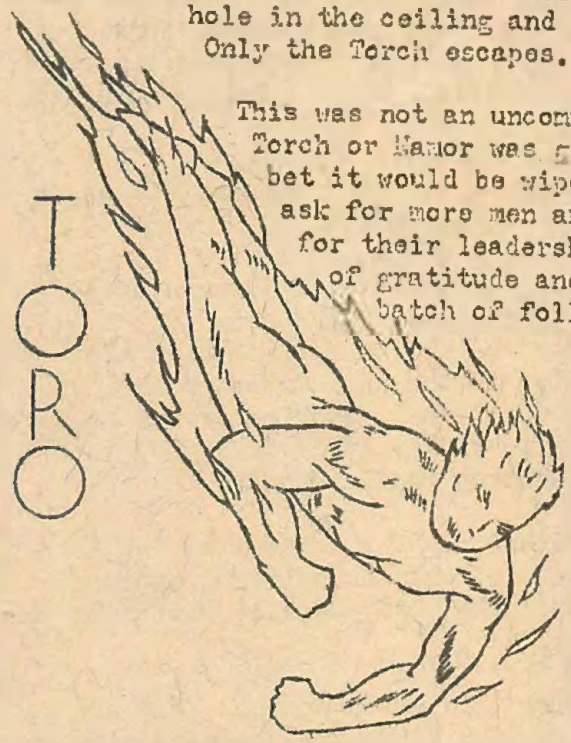
The villain in these battles was nearly always the Sub-Mariner, who was trying to conquer the surface people as his mother had ordered. The THE HUMAN TORCH #5, we have the all-star cast mentioned above in a story about "The four horsemen of destruction: Hitler, Mussolini, Death, and Sub-Mariner!" This was the Fall 1941 issue, written and released before the U.S. entered the war.

When the story opens, Angel, Patriot, Torch and Toro are at a banquet honoring a reporter friend who is going off as a war correspondent. Namor couldn't attend because he is swimming home in answer to an urgent summons from his mother. He arrives home to find death and destruction all about. Sunken ships have fallen on his undersea kingdom, depth charges have shattered the buildings and killed many of his people. His mother introduces him to Princess Rathia, of the Baltic Sea, who urges him to lead his people to stop the war. Namor agrees, not knowing that Rathia plans to have him conquer the whole world and rule it with herself as queen.

Casey, the reporter, is almost drowned when Namor opens his assault, overflowing a river to drown both the German and Russian armies, but the Torch saves him. The success of his opening move makes Namor putty in Rathia's webbed fingers. She says: "Dear, soon you will dominate the world above and below the seas -- you and I. They will call you a second Napoleon!" To which Namor replies: "Gosh!"

When the Torch comes to reason with him, Namor tries to enlist his aid and, when Torch refuses, tries to capture him. Toro is caught, but Torchy escapes and goes to try, unsuccessfully, to persuade Hitler and Stalin to combine forces and defeat Namor. He then goes to Africa to warn Ka-Zar to build an ark for himself and his animal buddies, which he does ("ho built de ark? Ka-Zar built dat ark!) with the aid of his elephants and monkeys. The rest of the world ignores Casey's newspaper warnings and it is only at the insistence of the Patriot that FDR (who is reading a copy of MARVEL) is convinced that it's for real.

Torch, meanwhile, talks Churchill into giving him an army which follows him as he burns a passage under the ocean floor to Namor's kingdom. Namor casually drills a hole in the ceiling and drowns all the British soldiers. Only the Torch escapes.



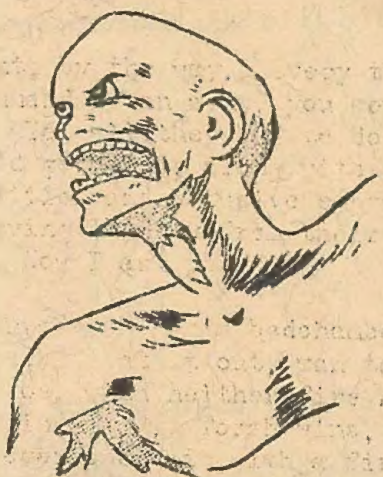
This was not an uncommon event, by the way. Every time Torch or Namor was given command of an army, you could bet it would be wiped out. Yet all they had to do was ask for more men and they'd get them, along with praise for their leadership abilities and effusive expressions of gratitude and unswerving loyalty from their next batch of followers. Now I ask you,

Torch invades Namor's bedchamber where they fight it out, man to man, toe to toe, with neither fire nor water being used. Torch wins, but Nathia overcomes him with a fir extinguisher. He is locked in a dungeon and hypnotically drugged to become Namor's slave, which he does become, in rather revolting, hand-kissing fashion.

Meanwhile, Toro, who has been kept in a dungeon up to his neck in water all this time, has become delirious, which causes Namor to have momentary plaguings from his conscience. Put in an undersea hospital, he manages to escape and makes his way to a hospital in London.

Then the Sub-Mariner begins his attack in earnest, capturing Gibraltar, wiping out the Italian navy and flooding Africa, proving that Ka-Zar knew what he was doing when he built that ark.

Torch is melting the polar ice cap under Namor's orders, sending glaciers over Europe and North America, but the sight of the American flag over our embassy in Moscow brings him to his senses and he stops them before they do much damage.



Namor then sends a tidal wave into New York (Sorry, Dick) but Torchy releases a stream of lava from the earth's core and turns it to steam (which hardly seems much of an improvement). Then he chases Namor, who flees blindly and cracks his head on the Statue of Liberty, which brings him to his senses and he tries to get Nathia to demobilize, but she shoots him, grazing his skull (naturally). Then the Torch appears flaming under water with the aid of a hose which pumps compressed air down to him. Between Namor and the Torch, Nathia's army is quickly wiped out.

In a later story, the Nazis trap Dr. Horton, Torchy's creator, and force him to make Torch into a giant under their control. Sub-Mariner and Toro join to fight the maddened, outsize Torch and it is the Sub-Mariner who traps him into the water and extinguishes him, which kind of evens the score.

After the war, Sub-Mariner drifted into a series of rather innocuous little adventures before he faded out around 1950. His re-introduction in 1954 was easily handled. His long absence was explained by a longer than usual "people are no damned good" mood.

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